In New York's French Quarter

Queer Corners and Strange People in the City's Heart

It is bounded on one side by Seventh avenue and on the other by Sixth, and is in the later Twenties, stepping over at the extreme limit into the Thirties, and it is veritably French. Other nationalities are interspersed here and there, but you rather resent the fact of the interlopers as you get to know them. You are New Yorker enough to want to keep this place intact in its French customs, language and types.

Wandering about these streets you might easily believe yourself in one of the less known districts of Paris or in one of the smaller towns of the provinces, for every type with which you are familiar is here, some suggesting the Latin Quarter, some zigzag journeys into continental Bohemia, some mere reproductions of the faces pictured in foreign periodicals.

It is often said that the French do not emigrate. Yet there are enough French people in the heart of New York city to make a fairly sizable town capable of running itself with home labor.

Here is the young miss, pretty and chic, dark eyes and darker hair, with the trick of the sidelong glance and the true Parisian manner of lifting her skirts and looking at the sky afterward—never before. The looking for rain is the price she pays for conventions. Her own climate is especially adapted to her need. They have little five minute showers, unexpected, and which never really wet you; here it rains all day, steady downpours, and other days—well, she has to make the excuse of forgetting the difference in climate.

The petite miss one meets here practises continually. Even the French children playing on the doorsteps have the trick of the shrug and the coquettish manner as they dress and undress their dolls.

But these charming types of femininity are sadly in the minority, for this is a hard-working district, and hard work never yet made any one beautiful. So it is only for a few years that the French girl attracts your attention, while she is passing that mythical brook where childhood and womanhood meet.

But if you have the seeing eye you may find much to attract, even though beauty is scarce, for the men and women who work and live and chatter in the streets and shops are interesting in their way too.

The few Americans and English who live in this part of town complain that the French are the most tenacious in the world of their own tongue. They simply refuse to learn any other, and if it is necessary for business purposes that the English language be spoken in a family one member only will learn it and the rest refuse. This is not indolence, for the French are industrious, but that love of country which exile does not destroy as easily in them as in many other nations.

One of the American doctors in this district, called in to attend a French woman, was told by her husband that she could speak no English; the doctor professed to know only his own tongue. The patient, becoming hysterical, cursed with strange varieties of French oaths which the doctor understood only too well. He remonstrated finally, saying that he would do no more to relieve her pain until she spoke so that he could diagnose her case. She became quiet immediately, and asked and answered questions in his language.

LONG ISLAND VEGETABLES IN THE FRENCH QUARTER.

THE HISTORIAN OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

ABOUT TO ORDER THE WEDDING CAKE.

"Why did she do it?" said the doctor afterward. "No one knows. It is a kind of pride with many of them not to know the language of the land of their adoption. It may not be all obstinacy," he went on to explain. "We Americans little understand the delight the French take in their tongue. We think of ours as a necessity, something to be used for our need. To them their language is something better, an ideal in their lives. The poorest peasant has that inborn desire to do justice to his language."

You see this truth in the French signs over the shops. These depend on the articles displayed in front and at the windows to explain themselves. Within a block or two you find *Charcuterie, Imprimerie, Pension* (with *On parle Français et Anglais* beneath), *Chambres meublées, Librairie Française* and many more.

When you step inside the charcuterie you have learned many of its products, for the real French shop keeps most of its wares in front or in the window. There is nothing in reserve, no dark corners filled with treasures, no well lined shelves.

You walk through a narrow lane banked on both sides with the crispest looking salads other deficiencies.

In this charcuterie is such a French woman. She is rotund in figure and has black, beady eyes. She is the typical French woman of the shopkeeper class, who seems to do all the work, while the husband, a mythical individual, referred to continually, but never seen, enjoys the fruit of her industry.

This French woman has an eye for a bargain. She shows the neat tins of truffles, paté-de-foie gras, olives stuffed with many different morsels, pastes alimentaires for the soups, savories for the ragouts, innumerable relishes strange as the vegetables outside, and all at prices which would more than repay the housekeeper who does her own marketing to go occasionally out of her beaten track. The average of price seems to be twenty or thirty per cent. lower than the shops which have to pay higher rents and service in more fashionable parts of the city.

The cheeses have a counter to themselves. There are camemberts, gorgonzolas, roquefort, brie, and the distigny, which the Frenchman thinks superior to the brie, whose near relative it is. Between these cheeses, as creamy as foam or whipped cream, are little bunches of effective green. You are stronger against temptation than most shoppers if you don't go away with your arms filled with octagonal shaped bundles, which may mean salads or cheeses or even truffled paste.

It is not until you have made your first purchase, two big bunches of salad for five cents, that the French woman, who has looked at you a little interrogatively from sole to head, an attitude combining the insolence of the male shopkeeper with the felinity of the feminine française, unbends and is suave and deprecating. Her "Is it that you ask, miss, only, or that you buy?" is replaced by "I give it to you for the same price I give my own people, although my husband may say"—again the mythical husband—"why did you do it? But I like the Americaines."

As you leave madame's servile bows and smiles, a Frenchman with a vandyke, natty shoes and shabby clothes goes by with a long loaf of bread under his arm. It is so long that it almost impedes traffic. You have not seen any so long since you were in Paris, for the so-called French bread of the average bakery is not within many inches of its canal-like proportions.

Just as you are discussing it you come to the patisserie, and there in the window are identical loaves. Inside you find them in big tins under the counters, ranged along the shelves and under the arms of buyers.

There is, however, a chic little French girl asking the proprietor about bridal cake, and turning away with a frown of disapprobation at his price, and a *Mon Dieu!* which would prove her nationality in a dark tunnel.

That is an idea which you immediately adopt. It is a bridal cake you want. You explain to the white aproned imposing French baker that you must have a bridal cake and demand the prices.

"We do not keep the bridal cake in stock; it is made to ordair."

A flush—you trust it is becoming—mantles your face. Either the Frenchman is polite or it is becoming.

"You are there to price it simply—in case." You drop your eyes.

There is nothing the typical Frenchman likes so much as to assist at a wedding in any capacity. He has even been known to like the rôle of bridegroom.

"Mam'selle. The cake, should you order it, will be a beauty. It will be but 30 cents a pound and of the heaviest. It is not the kind that you put under your pillow to dream on, it is the kind that you eat and then dream on—that is not the same thing. My cake" (the shoulders are hoisted high in the air) "is not tucked away beneath a miserable pillow. My cake, mam'selle, is tucked away—is tucked away."

You are practical and mention the icing.

"Mam'selle, the icing is, of course, extra. But such icing! Madame, if you had no husband in view and he saw that icing, he would succumb!"

You debate with him as to the respective merits of an Eiffel Tower done in paste, with a flag at the summit and preserved fruits inside, or two figures, a lady figure and a gentleman figure bowing across the icy expanse. The price is the same, but he thinks the figures would appeal more to "ze sentiment."

"And what, mam'selle," says he, "is a wedding without sentiment?"

You promise that when you have decided as to the thickness of the icing, the number of pounds and the ornaments you will let him know. He follows you to the door.

"Mam'selle, it is always well to be prepare. A wedding wizout ze cake, and ze cake wizout ze icing, what is it?—rien, worse zan nothing. I know. I know. I haf not live in this poor neighborhood where ze marriage is, well, a talk of ten minute, a priest, a ride in a hired voiture—think of it, mam'selle! not even a trip to ze suburb—c'est tout!"

You bow yourself out with protestations to match his. You nearly step into a basket of delicious meringues, and little tartlets on the window shelves tempt you anew. Certainly, where patisserie is concerned, we are still in the grip of the darkest ages.

Hardly have you escaped that tempting odor when another assails. This takes you to a queer little shop where terrapin and green turtle are excitingly advertised. You are sceptical in regard to these much talked of beasts, for the typical New Yorker suspects the real existence of every bird beast and crustacean that he can't find either in the Bronx or Central Park. Later you learn from unimpeachable authority that this little establishment furnishes the greater part of the green turtle soups and meat devoured in the city.

There are rows upon rows of cans all ready for the market, some labelled, some with blank faces. In the back, where the caldrons are simmering, great turtle skins lie about to prove identity if affidavit is required. In this place a quart of the liquid costs only 75 cents.

You knock at the basement door of a house where "Pension," in big white letters against a black background, appeals anew to curiosity.

"Mine host" comes to the door, he is white aproned, his mustache is corkscrewed, and he has a bottle of vin ordinaire as company.

"You would like a place where you could learn to speak French."

You find out, if you take his word, that this is just the place. In proof of his guarantee of good faith he shows you the dining room, with a piano in the corner, which an American lady plays every evening to attract custom; you note a familiar feature of the Parisian pension, the little pigeonhole on the wall where the napkins of the boarders are placed. He shows you madame, his wife, who is skinning chickens in the roomy kitchen and can't speak a word of English; also a front parlor, mostly adorned with a large plush clock, for $10 a week, a mere trifle when you are treated like one of the family and hear nothing, absolutely nothing, but the French conversazione—and such conversazione!

"Madame, you would be surprised at the topics you will hear discussed—you will hear much to your advantage. You will learn, and there is the vin ordinaire, too. It is of the best, like the conversazione."

It is the typical interior of the cheap table d'hôte which looks well only when the friendly gas is lighted.

You turn next into the emporium of art, where in the basement tubs of water stand about, the atmosphere is thick and powdery, and limbs in various stages of dislocation lie about nonchalantly. From the shelves upstairs Apollos, Mercurys, Cupids, Psyches, and all the Who's Whos of antiquity do not change expression at your approach.

Much strolling about the streets of New York may have rubbed off the first fine edge of your enthusiasm. But you are interested in learning that it was the father of the present proprietor who made the death mask of President Garfield, and that making death masks is a lucrative part of the business.

"They must be made six hours after death, twelve at the latest," is a bit of the weird information he volunteers. "Then, the features change not only expression but become warped. Do I find it unpleasant? It means nothing. I could not make a mask of one I knew, but on the stranger it is no more than working from the models we import from the Louvre—nothing more."

He shows a plaster cast of a man's brain and also odd deformed limbs, which specialty he includes in his mission to furnish copies of antiques to an art loving world. Cæsar dead and turned into a plaster cast may find himself in strange company.

In another downstairs shop, a little woman who is still young and must once have been pretty talks with a freedom which seems strange to Anglo-Saxon reserve.

"Why do so many of our people come here? We can make more money, and then some of us have to come. There are reasons."

"Surely not you, madame, you did not have to."

"I eloped. My grandparents with whom I live refuse. I run away. We come to America. We think to make our fortunes and, in a year at most, return to be forgiven. It is fourteen years ago, miss, and we have never return. We make some money at first, then it is stolen and now we begin all over again. The grandparents are long since dead. It would be strange that home going. I guess now we stay for good."

It is only an ordinary story of an expatriate, but it sounds pathetic, punctuated as it is by the cheerful *Bonjour* which madame exchanges now and then with her customers who come in get the *Figaro, Le Courrier des Etats-Unis* or some other periodical.

"It is true as you say," she resumes, "that the French people in New York know how to live more cheaply. We do not eat so much meat, and then the working classes spend so much on their beer. I have seen it, the German and the Irish thirty, forty cents a day. The Frenchman, no matter how poor, has his wine two or three times a day, but we have the good vin ordinaire that we get by the gallon, cheap. Even the children drink it. It is our habit, just as the Americans drink ice water."

She is proud only when she speaks of her son. He is 13, has taken a scholarship, speaks three languages and is now studying a fourth.

The little shop is musty as one on the Seine. There are old, moth eaten treasures carefully covered by Madame's fingers and a few new ones, with pale yellow covers and red letters. There is a large array of periodicals, with all those titles which Frenchmen use to let you know that the sheet is amusing, *The Laugh, The Smile, The World is Amused.* Madame shows them modestly; to her they represent a stock in trade merely. They are no more suggestive to her of immorality than are the post cards on another counter where gauzy gowned ladies toy with cigarettes and smile seductively at gentlemen in top hats. You cannot help wondering why the society which chases immoral literature has avoided this locality. But did the censor of morals ply his profession here, no one would be more surprised than Madame.

Luncheon is taken at a typical French restaurant. The menu is very like that of hundreds of others scattered about the city which lure the curious and impecunious, but the cooking and service remove it by many stages. And yet the place is vacant, except for a Jesuit priest who eats steadily through the bill of fare.

Then, when time points a warning hand, you end up your tour with the English physician who combines surgery, medicine and drug selling in a lucrative whole. He knows this queer locality like a book, and it is a book of strange people and adventures as he tells it. His own story is not the least interesting. He was with Garibaldi, was once a physician in one of New York's fashionable localities, from which he was driven by the impossibility of making Crœsus pay his bills. In this obscure corner of the city he is making money on cash payments.

These are only a few of the queer places and queer people right in the heart of New York.

THE BOARDING HOUSE KEEPER.

A FRENCH IMPORTATION.

"BON JOUR, MONSIEUR."

CONTRACTING BUSINESS STABLE.

It Supplies Private Delivery Outfits, Complete to the Last Detail.

It is a fact more or less familiar that there are livery stables which will contract to furnish to private patrons for their exclusive use carriages of any desired description, drawn by horses specially set apart for them and driven by coachmen permanently assigned, who do no other work, turnouts which are as solely for the private use of their lessees as though they were privately owned. It is not so well known, however, that there are contracting stables which furnish precisely to business concerns the same kind of service with delivery wagons and trucks.

Such a stable, under a contract for one or more years, will build to order for a business house any number of delivery wagons in any style of construction which may be desired, and finished in every way as may be required as to color, decoration and all other details. It will provide for the various sorts of vehicles appropriate horses and suitable drivers, the drivers in uniform if desired. The contracting stable will assume all responsibility of every sort, for loss of stock, liability for street accident or to employees, safe delivery of goods and collection of C. O D.s, and it will guarantee an uninterrupted service.

The service is provided and operated in every detail by the stable, but it is operated solely for the use of the lessee, and it is as absolutely at his disposal as though it were owned by him, and it may be that the contracting stable will supply such a service for less than it would cost a business concern to provide its own, maintaining its own stable.

The concern operating, say, ten or twenty wagons and keeping a stable of its own must keep some stock in reserve for use in case of emergency, and this stock is, of course, an expense whether it is used or not. Then there are various incidental expenses in a small stable as in a big one But in a big stable the reserve horses can be bunched and drawn upon for any group, thus requiring a smaller percentage of reserve stock, and many incidental expenses of care and maintenance of stock, vehicles and equipment are proportionately less in a big stable than in a smaller one.

On that account a contracting stable can provide, with a profit for itself, for a concern using a comparatively limited number of wagons, a delivery service in every way in exact accordance with its requirements, for less money than it would cost the concern to operate such an outfit with a stable of its own. It follows, of course, that concerns operating a large number of wagons and horses, and so maintaining very large stables, can practice all the economies possible in any great stable and so do their own work as cheaply as they could contract for it.

In the wholesale trades it has always been the custom for the merchant to contract with a truckman for the carting of the freight he has to ship. Some wholesale merchants own and maintain their trucking outfits, but more make contracts for the handling of their freight with employing truckmen, some of whom own many horses and trucks and have large capital invested in their business. Such contracts are made in various forms, many of them being, as it is called, "by the mark," which means at so much for the cartage of each case, or some other unit. Some truckmen do the carting for several houses, and so equalize their business and keep their equipment busy. And then some wholesale concerns make time contracts for the carting of their freight for a fixed gross amount.

Some of the largest wholesale houses do not own trucking outfits, but prefer to make yearly contacts with responsible truckmen for the cartage of their shipments. So in the wholesale trade the contract system, in some form, has long prevailed.

But in the retail trade the merchant comes, through the medium of his delivery wagons, in practically direct contact with his customers, and his horses and wagons convey more or less of an impression of the style and quality of his establishment. In many cases merchants have adopted some distinctive mark or color or some distinctive style of wagon as their own, marks or colors or styles which have often been preserved unchanged for many years. These wagons, wherever seen, are constant reminders of the establishments to which they belong.

Many of these establishments have extensive stables equipped with every sort of modern appliance; some of them fine and sightly buildings modern in equipment, and suited to the housing of wagons of elegance and horse stock of the best to be bought. Many of the owners take pride in their delivery service and find pleasure in having it kept up to the highest standard. There are owners who hold such a pride even though they may contract for carriages and horses for their personal use.

But business is business and the contracting stable offers advantages. It will supply an outfit in any style that may be required, and distinctive of the user down to the last detail, including his monogram on the harness and on the horses' blankets. And so the number of its patrons is increasing.